

Labouring-Class Poets¹

The Thresher's Labour (1736)

By Stephen Duck

The grateful tribute of these rural lays,
Which to her patron's hand the Muse conveys,
Deign to accept: 'tis just she tribute bring
To him, whose bounty gives her life to sing;
To him, whose gen'rous favours tune her voice;
And bid her, 'midst her poverty, rejoice.
Inspired by these, she dares herself prepare,
To sing the toils if each revolving year;
Those endless toils, which always grow anew,
[10] And the poor thresher's destined to pursue:
Ev'n these, with pleasure, can the Muse rehearse,
When you and gratitude demand her verse.

Soon as the golden harvest quits the plain,
And Ceres' gifts reward the farmer's plain;
[15] What corn each sheaf will yield, intent to hear,
And guess from thence the profits of the year,
He calls his reapers forth: around we stand,
With deep Attention, waiting his Command.

To each our Task he readily divides,
[20] And pointing, to our different Stations guides.
As he directs, to distant Barns we go;
Here two for Wheat, and there for Barley two.
But first, to shew what he expects to find,
These Words, or Words like these, disclose his Mind:

[25] "So dry the Corn was carry'd from the Field,
So easily 'twill thresh, so well 'twill yield;
Sure large Days-works I well may hope for now:
Come, strip and try; let's see what you can do."

Divested of our Cloathes, with Flail in Hand,
[30] At proper Distance, Front to Front we stand:
And first the Threshal's gently swung, to prove
Whether with just Exactness it will move:
That once secure, we swiftly whirl them round;
From the strong Planks our Crab-tree Staves rebound,

¹ All texts in the public domain. "The Thresher's Labour" copied and adapted from <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/ecco/004857010.0001.000/1:11?rgn=div1;view=fulltext> 22 Oct 2015. "The Woman's Labour" copied and adapted from http://www.usask.ca/english/barbauld/related_texts/collier.html 22 Oct 2015.

[35] And echoing Barns return the rattling Sound.
Now in the Air our knotty Weapons fly,
And now with equal Force descend from high;
Down one, one up, so well they keep the Time,
The Cyclops' Hammers could not truer chime;
[40] Nor with more heavy Strokes could Aetna groan,
When Vulcan forg'd the Arms for Thetis' Son.
In briny Streams our Sweat descends apace,
Drops from our Locks, or trickles down our Face.
No Intermission in our Work we know;
[45] The noisy Threshal must for ever go.
Their Master absent, others safely play;
The sleeping Threshal does itself betray.
Nor yet, the tedious Labour to beguile,
And make the passing Minutes sweetly smile,
[50] Can we, like Shepherds, tell a merry Tale;
The Voice is lost, drown'd by the louder Flail.
But we may think—Alas! what pleasing thing,
Here, to the Mind, can the dull Fancy bring?
Our Eye beholds no pleasing Object here,
[55] No cheerful Sound diverts our list'ning Ear.
The Shepherd well may tune his Voice to sing,
Inspir'd with all the Beauties of the Spring.
No Fountains murmur here, no Lambkins play,
No Linnets warble, and no Fields look gay;
[60] 'Tis all a gloomy, melancholy Scene,
Fit only to provoke the Muse's Spleen.
When sooty Pease we thresh, you scarce can know
Our native Colour, as from Work we go.
The Sweat, the Dust, and suffocating Smoak,
[65] Make us so much like Ethiopians look,
We scare our Wives, when Ev'ning brings us home;
And frighted Infants think the Bugbear come.
Week after Week, we this dull Task pursue,
Unless when winn'wing Days produce a new:
[70] A new, indeed, but frequently a worse!
The Threshal yields but to the Master's Curse.
He counts the Bushels, counts how much a Day;
Then swears we've idled half our Time away:
"Why, look ye, Rogues, d'ye think that this will do?
[75] "Your Neighbours thresh as much again as you."
Now in our Hands we wish our noisy Tools,
To drown the hated Names of Rogues and Fools.

But wanting these, we just like School-boys look,
When angry Masters view the blotted Book:
[80] They cry, "their Ink was faulty, and their Pen;"
We, "the Corn threshes bad, 'twas cut too green."

But soon as Winter hides his hoary Head,
And Nature's Face is with new Beauty spread;
The lovely Spring appears, refreshing Show'rs
[85] New clothe the Field with Grass, and blooming Flow'rs.

Next her, the rip'ning Summer presses on,
And SOL begins his longest Race to run.
Before the Door our welcome Master stands;
Tells us, the ripen'd Grass requires our Hands.
[90] The grateful Tidings presently imparts
Life to our Looks, and Spirits to our Hearts.
We wish the happy Season may be fair;
And, joyful, long to breathe in op'ner Air.
This Change of Labour seems to give such Ease,
[95] With Thoughts of Happiness ourselves we please.

But, ah! how rarely's Happiness complete!
There's always Bitter mingled with the Sweet.
When first the Lark sings Prologue to the Day,
We rise, admonish'd by his early Lay;
[100] This new Employ with eager Haste to prove,
This new Employ, become so much our Love.
Alas! that human Joys should change so soon!
Our Morning Pleasure turns to Pain at Noon.
The Birds salute us, as to Work we go,
[105] And with new Life our Bosoms seem to glow.
On our right Shoulder hangs the crooked Blade,
The Weapon destin'd to uncloath the Mead:
Our left supports the Whetstone, Scrip, and Beer;
This for our Scythes, and these ourselves to chear.
[110] And now the Field, design'd to try our Might,
At length appears, and meets our longing Sight.
The Grass and Ground we view with careful Eyes,
To see which way the best Advantage lies;
And, Hero-like, each claims the foremost Place.
[115] At first our Labour seems a sportive Race:
With rapid Force our sharpen'd Blades we drive,
Strain ev'ry Nerve, and Blow for Blow we give.
All strive to vanquish, tho' the Victor gains
No other Glory, but the greatest Pains.

[120] But when the scorching Sun is mounted high,

And no kind Barns with friendly Shade are nigh;
Our weary Scythes entangle in the Grass,
While Streams of Sweat run trickling down apace.
Our sportive Labour we too late lament;
[125] And wish that Strength again, we vainly spent.

Thus, in the Morn, a Courser have I seen
With headlong Fury scour the level Green;
Or mount the Hills, if Hills are in his Way,
As if no Labour could his Fire allay;
[130] Till Phoebus, shining with meridian Heat,
Has bath'd his panting Sides in briny Sweat:
The lengthen'd Chace scarce able to sustain,
He measures back the Hills and Dales with Pain.

With Heat and Labour tir'd, our Scythes we quit,
[135] Search out a shady Tree, and down we sit:
From Scrip and Bottle hope new Strength to gain;
But Scrip and Bottle too are try'd in vain.
Down our parch'd Throats we scarce the Bread can get;
And, quite o'erspent with Toil, but faintly eat.
[140] Nor can the Bottle only answer all;
The Bottle and the Beer are both too small.
Time flows: Again we rise from off the Grass;
Again each Mower takes his proper Place;
Not eager now, as late, our Strength to prove;
[145] But all contented regular to move.
We often whet, and often view the Sun;
As often wish, his tedious Race was run.
At length he veils his purple Face from Sight,
And bids the weary Labourer Good-night.
[150] Homewards we move, but spent so much with Toil,
We slowly walk, and rest at ev'ry Stile.
Our good expecting Wives, who think we stay,
Got to the Door, soon eye us in the Way.
Then from the Pot the Dumplin's catch'd in haste,
[155] And homely by its Side the Bacon plac'd.
Supper and Sleep by Morn new Strength supply;
And out we set again, our Work to try;
But not so early quite, nor quite so fast,
As, to our Cost, we did the Morning past.

[160] Soon as the rising Sun has drank the Dew,
Another Scene is open to our View:
Our Master comes, and at his Heels a Throng
Of prattling Females, arm'd with Rake and Prong;

Prepar'd, whilst he is here, to make his Hay;
[165] Or, if he turns his Back, prepar'd to play:
But here, or gone, sure of this Comfort still;
Here's Company, so they may chat their Fill.
Ah! were their Hands so active as their Tongues,
How nimbly then would move the Rakes and Prongs!

[170] The Grass again is spread upon the Ground,
Till not a vacant Place is to be found;
And while the parching Sun-beams on it shine,
The Hay-makers have Time allow'd to dine.

That soon dispatch'd, they still sit on the Ground;
[175] And the brisk Chat, renew'd, afresh goes round.

All talk at once; but seeming all to fear,
That what they speak, the rest will hardly hear;
Till by degrees so high their Notes they strain,
A Stander by can nought distinguish plain.
[180] So loud's their Speech, and so confus'd their Noise,
Scarce puzzled ECHO can return the Voice.

Yet, spite of this, they bravely all go on;
Each scorns to be, or seem to be, outdone.
Meanwhile the changing Sky begins to lour,
[185] And hollow Winds proclaim a sudden Show'r:
The tattling Crowd can scarce their Garments gain,
Before descends the thick impetuous Rain;
Their noisy Prattle all at once is done,
And to the Hedge they soon for Shelter run.

[190] Thus have I seen, on a bright Summer's Day,
On some green Brake, a Flock of Sparrows play;
From Twig to Twig, from Bush to Bush they fly;
And with continu'd Chirping fill the Sky:
But, on a sudden, if a Storm appears,
[195] Their chirping Noise no longer dins your Ears:
They fly for Shelter to the thickest Bush;
There silent sit, and All at once is hush.

But better Fate succeeds this rainy Day,
And little Labour serves to make the Hay.
[200] Fast as 'tis cut, so kindly shines the Sun,
Turn'd once or twice, the pleasing Work is done.
Next Day the Cocks appear in equal Rows,
Which the glad Master in safe Ricks bestows.

THE spacious Fields we now no longer range;
[205] And yet, hard Fate! still Work for Work we change.
Back to the Barns we hastily are sent,

Where lately so much Time we pensive spent:
Not pensive now, we bless the friendly Shade;
And to avoid the parching Sun are glad.
[210] Yet little Time we in the Shade remain,
Before our Master calls us forth again;
And says, "For Harvest now yourselves prepare;
The ripen'd Harvést now demands your Care.
Get all things ready, and be quickly drest;
[215] Early next Morn I shall disturb your Rest."
Strict to his Word! for scarce the Dawn appears,
Before his hasty Summons fills our Ears.
His hasty Summons we obey; and rise,
While yet the Stars are glimm'ring in the Skies.
[220] With him our Guide we to the Wheat-field go,
He to appoint, and we the Work to do.

Ye Reapers, cast your Eyes around the Field;
And view the various Scenes its Beauties yield:
Then look again, with a more tender Eye,
[225] To think how soon it must in Ruin lie!
For, once set in, where-e'er our Blows we deal,
There's no resisting of the well-whet Steel:
But here or there, where-e'er our Course we bend,
Sure Desolation does our Steps attend.

[230] Thus, when Arabia's Sons, in Hopes of Prey,
To some more fertile Country take their Way,
How beauteous all Things in the Morn appear!
There rural Cots, and pleasant Villa's here!
So many grateful Objects meet the Sight,
[235] The ravish'd Eye could willing gaze till Night.
But long ere then, where-e'er their Troops have past,
These pleasing Prospects lie a gloomy Waste.

The Morning past, we sweat beneath the Sun;
And but uneasily our Work goes on.
[240] Before us we perplexing Thistles find,
And Corn blown adverse with the ruffling Wind.
Behind our Master waits; and if he spies
One charitable Ear, he grudging cries,
"Ye scatter half your Wages o'er the Land."
[245] Then scrapes the Stubble with his greedy Hand.

Let those who feast at Ease on dainty Fare,
Pity the Reapers, who their Feasts prepare:
For Toils scarce ever ceasing press us now;
Rest never does, but on the Sabbath, show;

[250] And barely that our Masters will allow.
Think what a painful Life we daily lead;
Each Morning early rise, go late to Bed:
Nor, when asleep, are we secure from Pain;
We then perform our Labours o'er again:
[255] Our mimic Fancy ever restless seems;
And what we act awake, she acts in Dreams.
Hard Fate! Our Labours ev'n in Sleep don't cease;
Scarce Hercules e'er felt such Toils as these!
But soon we rise the bearded Crop again,
[260] Soon Phoebus' Rays well dry the golden Grain.
Pleas'd with the Scene, our Master glows with Joy;
Bids us for Carrying all our Force employ;
When strait Confusion o'er the Field appears,
And stunning Clamours fill the Workmens Ears;
[265] The Bells and clashing Whips alternate sound,
And rattling Waggon's thunder o'er the Ground.
The Wheat, when carry'd, Pease, and other Grain,
We soon secure, and leave a fruitless Plain;
In noisy Triumph the last Load moves on,
[270] And loud Huzza's proclaim the Harvest done.
Our Master, joyful at the pleasing Sight,
Invites us all to feast with him at Night.
A Table plentifully spread we find,
And Jugs of humming Ale, to cheer the Mind;
[275] Which he, too gen'rous, pushes round so fast,
We think no Toils to come, nor mind the past.
But the next Morning soon reveals the Cheat,
When the same Toils we must again repeat;
To the same Barns must back again return,
[280] To labour there for Room for next Year's Corn.
Thus, as the Year's revolving Course goes round,
No Respite from our Labour can be found:
Like Sisyphus, our Work is never done;
Continually rolls back the restless Stone.
[285] New-growing Labours still succeed the past;
And growing always new, must always last.

The Woman's Labour: To Mr. Stephen Duck (1739)
By Mary Collier

IMMORTAL Bard! thou Favrite of the Nine!

Enrich'd by Peers, advanc'd by CAROLINE!
Deign to look down on One that's poor and low
Remembering you yourself was lately so;
[5] Accept these Lines : Alas! what can you have
From her, who ever was, and's still a Slave?
No Learning ever was bestow'd on me;
My Live was always spent in Drudgery:
And not alone; alas! with Grief I find,
[10] It is the Portion of poor Woman-kind.
Oft have I thought as on my Bed I lay,
Eas'd from the tiresome Labours of the Day,
Our first Extraction from a Mass refin'd,
Could never be for Slavery design'd;
[15] Till Time and Custom by degrees destroy'd
That happy State our Sex at first enjoy'd.
When Men had us'd their utmost Care and Toil,
Their Recompence was but a Female Smile;
When they by Arts or Arms were render'd Great,
[20] They laid their Trophies at a Woman's Feet;
They, in those Days, unto our Sex did bring
Their Hearts, their All, a Free-will Offering;
And as from us their Being they derive,
They back again should all due Homage give.

[25] JOVE once descending from the Clouds, did drop
In Show'rs of Gold on lovely Danae's Lap;
The sweet-tongu'd Poets, in those generous Days,
Unto our Shrine still offer'd up their Lays:
But now, alas! that Golden Age is past,
[30] We are the Objects of your Scorn at last.
And you, great DUCK, upon whose happy Brow
The Muses seem to fix the Garland now,
In your late Poem boldly did declare
Alcides' Labours can't with your's compare;
[35] And of your annual Task have much to Say,
Of Threshing, Reaping, Mowing Corn and Hay;
Boasting your daily Toil, and nightly Dream,
But can't conclude your never-dying Theme,
And let our hapless Sex in Silence lie
[40] Forgotten, and in dark Oblivion die;
But on our abject State you throw your Scorn
And Women wrong, your Verses to adorn.
You of Hay-making speak a Word or two,

As if our Sex but little Work could do:
[45] This makes the honest Farmer smiling say,
He'll seek for Women still to make his Hay;
For if his Back be turn'd, their Work they mind
As well as Men, as far as he can find.
For my own Part, I many a Summer's Day
[50] Have spent in throwing, turning, making Hay;
But ne'er could see, what you have lately found,
Our Wages paid for sitting on the Ground.
'Tis true, that when our Morning's Work is done,
And all our Grass expos'd unto the Sun,
[55] While that his scorching Beams do on it shine,
As well as you, we have a Time to dine:
I hope, that since we freely toil and sweat
To earn our Bread, you'll give us Time to eat.
That over, soon we must get up again,
[60] And nimbly turn our Hay upon the Plain;
Nay, rake and prow it in, the Case is clear;
Or how should Cocks in equal Rows appear?
But if you'd have what you have wrote believ'd,
I find, that you to hear us talk are griev'd:
[65] In this, I hope, you do not speak your Mind,
For none but Turks, that ever I could find,
Have Mutes to serve them, or did e'er deny
Their Slaves, at Work to chat it merrily.
Since you have Liberty to speak your Mind,
[70] And are to talk, as well as we, inclin'd
Why should you thus repine, because that we,
Like you, enjoy that pleasing Liberty?
What! would you lord it quite, and take away
The only Privilege our Sex enjoy?

[75] WHEN Ev'ning does approach, we homeward hie,
And our domestic Toils Incessant ply:
Against your coming Home prepare to get
Our Work all done, our House in order set;
Bacon and *Dumpling* in the Pot we boil,
[80] Our Beds we make, our Swine we fee the while;
Then wait at Door to see you coming Home,
And set the Table out against you come:
Early next Morning we on you attend;
Our Children dress and feed, their Cloaths we mend;
[85] And in the Field our daily Task renew,

Soon as the rising Sun has dry'd the Dew.

WHEN Harvest comes, into the Field we go,
And help to reap the Wheat as well as you;
Or else we go the Ears of Corn to glean;
[90] No Labour scorning, be it e'er so mean;
But in the Work we freely bear a Part,
And what we can, perform with all our Heart.
To get a Living we so willing are,
Our tender Babes into the Field we bear,
[95] And wrap them in our Cloaths to keep them warm,
While round about we gather up the Corn;
And often unto them our Course do bend,
To keep them safe, that nothing them offend:
Our Children that are able, bear a Share
[100] In gleaning Corn, such is our frugal Care.
When Night comes on, unto our Home we go,
Our Corn we carry, and our Infant too;
Weary, alas! but 'tis not worth our while
Once to complain, or rest at ev'ry Stile;
[105] We must make haste, for when we Home are come,
Alas! we find our Work but just begun ;
So many Things for our Attendance call,
Had we ten Hands, we could employ them all.
Our Children put to Bed, with greatest Care
[110] We all Things for your coming Home prepare:
You sup, and go to Bed without delay,
And rest yourselves till the ensuing Day;
While we, alas! but little Sleep can have,
Because our froward Children cry and rave;
[115] Yet, without fail, soon as Day-light doth spring,
We in the Field again our Work begin
And there, with all our Strength, our Toil renew,
Till Titan's golden Rays have dry'd the Dew;
Then home we go unto our Children dear,
[120] Dress, feed, and bring them to the Field with care.
Were this your Case, you justly might complain
That Day nor Night you are secure from Pain;
Those mighty Troubles which perplex your Mind,
(Thistles before, and Females come behind)
[125] Would vanish soon, and quickly disappear,
Were you, like us, encumber'd thus with Care.
What you would have of us we do not know:

We oft' take up the Corn that you do mow;
We cut the Peas, and always ready are
[130] In ev'ry Work to take our proper Share;
And from the Time that Harvest doth begin,
Until the Corn be cut and carry'd in,
Our Toil and Labour's daily so extreme,
That we have hardly ever Time to dream.

[135] THE Harvest ended, Respite none we find;
The hardest of our Toil is still behind:
Hard Labour we most chearfully pursue,
And our, abroad, a Charing often go:
Of which I now will briefly tell in part,
[140] What fully to declare is past my Art;
So many Hardships daily we go through,
I boldly say, the like *you* never knew.

WHEN bright Orion glitters in the Skies
In Winter Nights, then early we must rise;
[145] The Weather ne'er so bad, Wind, Rain, or Snow,
Our Work appointed, we must rise and go;
While you on easy Beds may lie and sleep,
Till Light does thro' your Chamber-windows peep.
When to the House we come where we should go,
[150] How to get in, alas! we do not know :
The Maid quite tir'd with Work the Day before,
O'ercome with Sleep; we standing at the Door
Oppress'd with Cold, and often call in vain,
E're to our Work we can Admittance gain:
[155] But when from Wind and Weather we get in,
Briskly with Courage we our Work begin;
Heaps of fine Linen we before us view,
Whereon to lay our Strength and Patience too;
Cambricks and Muslins, which our Ladies wear,
[160] Laces and Edgings, costly, fine, and rare,
Which must be wash'd with utmost Skill and Care;
With Holland Shirts, Ruffles and Fringes too,
Fashions which our Fore-fathers never knew.
For several Hours here we work and slave,
[165] Before we can one Glimpse of Day-light have;
We labour hard before the Morning's past,
Because we fear the Time runs on too fast.

AT length bright Sol illuminates the Skies,
And summons drowsy Mortals to arise;
[170] Then comes our Mistress to us without fail,
And in her Hand, perhaps, a Mug of Ale
To cheer our Hearts, and also to inform
Herself, what Work is done that very Morn;
Lays her Commands upon us, that we mind
[175] Her Linen well, nor leave the Dirt behind:
Not this alone, but also to take care
We don't her Cambricks nor her Ruffles tear;
And these most strictly does of us require,
To save her Soap, and sparing be of Fire;
[180] Tells us her Charge is great, nay furthermore,
Her Cloaths are fewer than the Time before.
Now we drive on, resolv'd our Strength to try,
And what we can, we do most willingly;
Until with Heat and Work, 'tis often known,
[185] Not only Sweat, but Blood runs trickling down
Our Wrists and Fingers; still our Work demands
The constant Action of our lab'ring Hands.

NOW Night comes on, from whence you have Relief,
But that, alas! does but increase our Grief;
[190] With heavy Hearts we often view the Sun,
Fearing he'll set before our Work is done;
For either in the Morning, or at Night,
We piece the Summer's Day with Candle-light.
Tho' we all Day with Care our Work attend,
[195] Such is our Fate, we know not when 'twill end:
When Ev'ning's come, you Homeward take your Way,
We, till our Work is done, are forc'd to stay;
And after all our Toil and Labour past,
Six-pence or Eight-pence pays us off at last;
[200] For all our Pains, no Prospect can we see
Attend us, but Old Age and Poverty.

THE Washing is not all we have to do:
We oft change Work for Work as well as you.
Our Mistress of her Pewter doth complain,
[205] And 'tis our Part to make it clean again.
This Work, tho' very hard and tiresome too,
Is not the worst we hapless Females do:
When Night comes on, and we quite weary are,

We scarce can count what falls unto our Share;
[210] Pots, Kettles, Sauce-pans, Skillets, we may see,
Skimmers and Ladles, and such Trumpery,
Brought in to make complete our Slavery.
Tho' early in the Morning 'tis begun,
'Tis often very late before we've done;
[215] Alas! our Labours never know an End ;
On Brass and Iron we our Strength must spend;
Our tender Hands and Fingers scratch and tear:
All this, and more, with Patience we must bear.
Colour'd with Dirt and Filth we now appear;
[220] Your threshing sooty Peas will not come near.
All the Perfections Woman once could boast,
Are quite obscur'd, and altogether lost.

Once more our Mistress sends to let us know
She wants our Help, because the Beer runs low:
[225] Then in much haste for Brewing we prepare,
The Vessels clean, and scald with greatest Care;
Often at Midnight, from our Bed we rise
At other Times, ev'n that will not suffice;
Our Work at Ev'ning oft we do begin,
[230] And 'ere we've done, the Night comes on again.
Water we pump, the Copper we must fill,
Or tend the Fire; for if we e'er stand still,
Like you, when threshing, we a Watch must keep,
Our Wort Boils over if we dare to sleep.

[235] BUT to rehearse all Labour is in vain,
Of which we very justly might complain:
For us, you see, but little Rest is found ;
Our Toil increases as the Year runs round.
While you to Sysiphus yourselves compare,
[240] With Danaus' Daughters we may claim a Share ;
For while *he* labours hard against the Hill,
Bottomless Tubs of Water *they* must fill.

SO the industrious Bees do hourly strive
To bring their Loads of Honey to the Hive ;
[245] Their sordid Owners always reap the Gains,
And poorly recompense their Toil and Pains.